



Branches on the Vine

JANUARY 3 - 9, 2026



Father Jeffrey Gubbiotti holds the General Store in his Christmas village, one of many three-dimensional puzzles he made for the display at the St. Mary rectory in Derby.

PHOTO BY JOE PISANI

PRIEST KEEPS CHRISTMAS SPIRIT ALIVE WITH NOSTALGIC TRIBUTES

When Father Jeffrey Gubbiotti was in high school, five friends came over for pizza two days before Christmas, and while they were hanging out, someone mentioned caroling. That night, young Jeffrey, who had never seen carolers, began a lifelong tradition when the six friends went out singing Christmas carols in the Oakville neighborhood of Watertown.

He continued doing it every year through college, seminary and his priesthood, and now as pastor of Our Lady Queen of the Apostles Parish in Derby, he recently hosted the “Christmas Caroling Party” at St. Mary rectory followed by an open house.

“From six of us in high school to as many as 70 in later years, I’ve tried to keep up the tradition,” he says. “The week before Christmas, we have an Advent prayer service, trivia games and caroling in the neighborhood, and later everyone is invited to the rectory to see the decorations.”

It’s a holy and nostalgic time for Father Gubbiotti, who cherishes reminders of past Christmases with his parents and sister — including the nativity set his mother Cindy made in ceramics class, still displayed although the camel’s head had to be repaired. Then, there was the merry-go-round carousel he got when he was 8 years old.

“Over the years, you collect things that hold memories and evoke people you knew and events in your life,” he says. “I still have family ornaments from when I was young, and I put them on the tree now.”

For the priest, the season is also filled with religious symbolism.

“To me, the Christmas tree symbolizes Christ, the source of life,” Father Gubbiotti says. “He’s the vine and we are the branches, and when you put lights on the tree, it’s a reminder he’s the light of the world. The ornaments represent me and my family members. Hanging them is a way of uniting my life and those I love to Christ’s life. It’s a prayerful thing.”

There’s also another tree he displays that has special meaning. It’s a tree he bought for \$3 15 years ago, which he decorates with New York Yankee ornaments. At the top is a star he got for 50 cents that blinks blue and white — the team’s colors. Sometimes, he says, friends surreptitiously hang Boston Red Sox ornaments on it when he’s not looking.

Among decorations in the rectory are figurines he acquired on pilgrimages, including a carved St. Nicholas when he attended the famous German Passion Play

in the village of Oberammergau; a nativity from Assisi, where St. Francis created the first live nativity in 1223; a crèche from Mexico, where he studied Spanish early in his priesthood, and a Three Kings plate from Puerto Rico.

“They are things that have special meaning and remind me of people and trips I’ve made,” he says. “They also remind me to pray for them.”

Most important of all, Father Gubbiotti says traditions like these are a way to spiritually prepare us for the birth of the Christ child. Throughout Advent, the parish had a full calendar of events, including a session for ornament-making, a tree lighting at St. Mary-St. Michael School in Derby, an evening of lessons and carols, a Christmas cookie sale by Ladies Guild, and a crèche reenactment on Christmas Eve.

“The things that we all do to get ready for Christmas can be overwhelming and a source of stress,” Father Gubbiotti says, “but they can also be a source of prayer and an encounter with Christ if we invite Jesus be a part of them — whether it’s decorating, baking cookies or writing Christmas cards.”

-Story by Joe Pisani



Upcoming Events



Archdiocese of Hartford *Wedding Anniversary Mass*

The Archdiocese of Hartford is celebrating its' annual Wedding Anniversary Mass in conjunction with the observance of **National Marriage Week** (February 7 – 14, 2026) an international event seeking to strengthen marriages in communities and influence the current culture.

National Marriage Week is an opportunity for the Catholic Church to focus on and celebrate the vocation to marriage and family life. It is an opportunity for the Catholic faithful to renew and deepen the lived experience of the Sacrament of Marriage – and bear witness to God's call to love.

On **Saturday, February 7, 2026**, The Most Reverend Christopher J. Coyne, Archbishop of Hartford, will be honoring couples celebrating milestone marriage anniversaries: first and five-year increments from 5 to 60 years, and every year beyond 60 years during 2025 – 2026. *The Marriage Anniversary Mass* will be at the Cathedral of Saint Joseph in Hartford at 4:00 p.m. **Registration closes January 21.** (Snow date if necessary - February 28)



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*Men's Retreat
January 16-18, 2026
Holy Family Retreat Team*



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Offering: \$375; more if you can, less if you can't.
Visit www.holyfamilyretreat.org to register or learn more

Holy Family Passionist Retreat Center, 303 Tunxis Road, West Hartford, CT